AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the applications:

Listing of Claims:

Claims 1-20 (canceled)

21. (Previously Presented) An isolated polynucleotide for enhancing protein expression, wherein the polynucleotide comprises the continuous nucleic acid sequence consisting of nucleotides 181-341 of SEQ ID NO: 1 including one thymidine inserted between position 206 and 207 of SEQ ID NO: 1 and enhances protein expression when incorporated downstream of an expression regulatory promoter sequence and upstream of a protein coding sequence.

22. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21, which enhances said protein expression by increasing translation of the mRNA encoding said protein.

23. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21, which enhances said protein expression by increasing IRES activity.

Claims 24-25 (canceled).

26. (Previously Presented) An isolated polynucleotide consisting of the nucleotide sequence as set forth in SEQ ID NO: 7 over its entire length.

27. (canceled).

28. (Previously Presented) An expression vector comprising the isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or claim 26.

29. (Previously Presented) An isolated host cell transformed or transfected with the vector according to claim 28.

30. (Previously Presented) A method of expressing a protein *in vitro,* comprising the steps of:

(a) transforming or transfecting an isolated host cell with the expression vector comprising both the isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or 26 and a protein coding sequence operably inserted downstream of the polynucleotide for enhancing protein expression, and

(b) growing the host cell in a medium under conditions where the cell expresses the protein.

31. (Previously Presented) The method according to claim 30, wherein the method further comprises, after step (b), a step of isolating the protein from the cell and/or the growth medium.

32. (canceled).

33. (Previously Presented) A probe for screening substances that interact with IRES, comprising the polynucleotide according to claim 26, further comprising a detectable label.

34. (Previously Presented) A probe for screening IRES-dependent translation inhibitors, comprising the polynucleotide according to claim 26, further comprising a detectable label.

35. (Previously Presented) A composition comprising the isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21.

36. (Previously Presented) A composition comprising the isolated polynucleotide according to claim 26.

37. (Previously Presented) A method for determining a hypervirulent hepatitis C strain, comprising the steps of:

(a) screening a biological sample for the presence of the polynucleotide according to claim 26, and;

(b) determining presence or absence of the hypervirulent hepatitis C strain from the screening step, wherein the presence of the polynucleotide identifies the hypervirulent

hepatitis C strain in the biological sample and the absence of said sequence indicates the absence of said hypervirulent hepatitis C.

38. (Previously Presented) An isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21, further comprising the continuous nucleotides consisting of nucleotides 1-180 of SEQ ID NO: 1.

39. (Previously Presented) An isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or 38, further comprising the continuous nucleotides consisting of nucleotides 342-713 of SEQ ID NO: 1.

Claims 40-43 (cancelled).

44. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 21 or 26 which further comprises continuous nucleotides for enhancing protein expression, wherein a 5'-untranslated region of the continuous nucleotides comprises a nucleotide sequence corresponding to at least one region selected from the group consisting of pyrimidine-rich tract, Box A, Box B, a trans factor-binding site, and a combination thereof.

Claim 45 (canceled).

Claims 46-48 (canceled).

49. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 44, wherein the 5'-untranslated region comprises an AUG or ATG sequence.

50. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 44, wherein the 5'-untranslated region comprises a part or an entire region of IRES of viral mRNA.

51. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 44, wherein said continuous nucleotides further comprises a portion of a coding region taken from a viral gene adjacent to the 5'-untranslated region.

52. (Previously Presented) The isolated polynucleotide according to claim 26, wherein said nucleotide sequence is a cDNA sequence.

53. (Previously Presented) An expression vector according to claim 28, further comprising a protein coding sequence operably inserted downstream of the polynucleotide for enhancing protein expression.

54. (canceled).

55. (Previously Presented) An expression vector comprising a promoter sequence, a protein coding sequence and the nucleotide sequence set out in SEQ ID NO: 7 over its entire length incorporated downstream of the promoter sequence and upstream of protein coding sequence, wherein the nucleotide sequence enhances expression of the protein coding region by means of increasing IRES activity.

56. (Previously Presented) The expression vector according to claim 55, which is a vector for expression in eukaryotic cells.

Claims 57-65 (canceled).